

Blackfoot River Recreation Management

2011 Annual Report

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Introduction

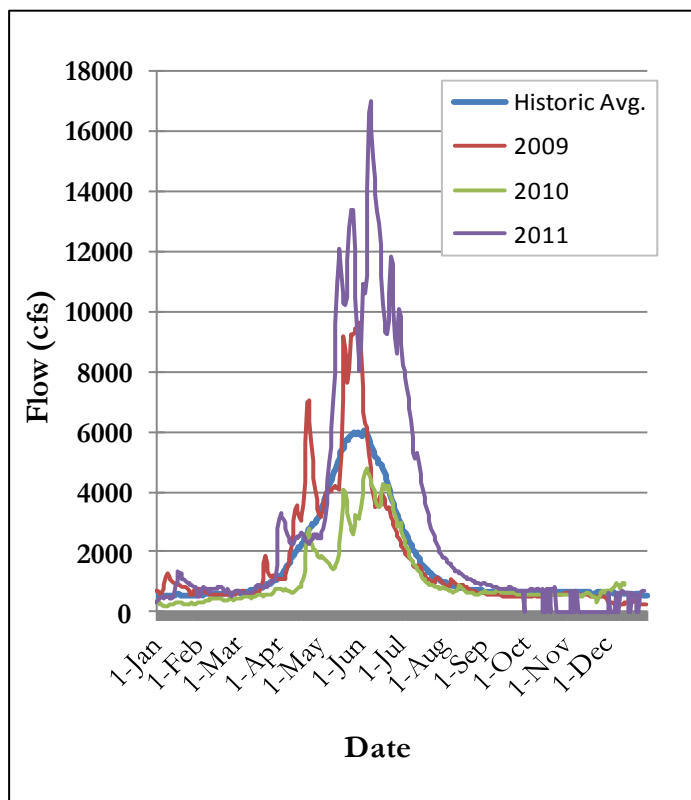
Located near Missoula Montana, the Blackfoot River is one of Montana's most popular rivers for recreation. Visitors to the Blackfoot enjoy beautiful scenery and a diverse range of recreational opportunities such as angling, whitewater boating, inner-tubing, camping, picnicking and sunbathing.

In addition to public access sites, the Blackfoot River Recreation Corridor Landowner's Agreement provides public access to private land 50 feet above the high water mark, unless otherwise stipulated. This agreement is a product of visionary Blackfoot landowners and cooperative managing agencies. The Blackfoot River Recreation Corridor extends from Russell Gates Fishing Access Site (FAS) to Johnsrud Park FAS.



Floaters in the Blackfoot Recreation Corridor

Figure 1: Blackfoot River Flows—2011 Compared to 2010, 2009 and the Historical Average.



Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) manages recreation on and along the Blackfoot River in conjunction with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) through a cooperative management agreement. The following report summarizes program components, visitor use statistics, management activities and accomplishments from 2011.

Seasonal Conditions

Figure 1 shows the hydrograph for the Blackfoot River in 2009, 2010, 2011 and the historic average. This graph compares the river's flow throughout the year and helps to explain how water levels affect recreation on the Blackfoot. This data was taken at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) Bonner gauging station (#12340000).

The 2011 river flows were far above the historic average of 6,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), with the Blackfoot rising to over 17,000 cfs. As a result, the Blackfoot River was extremely high and cold into mid July and some FAS's were closed or provided only limited access due to flooding.

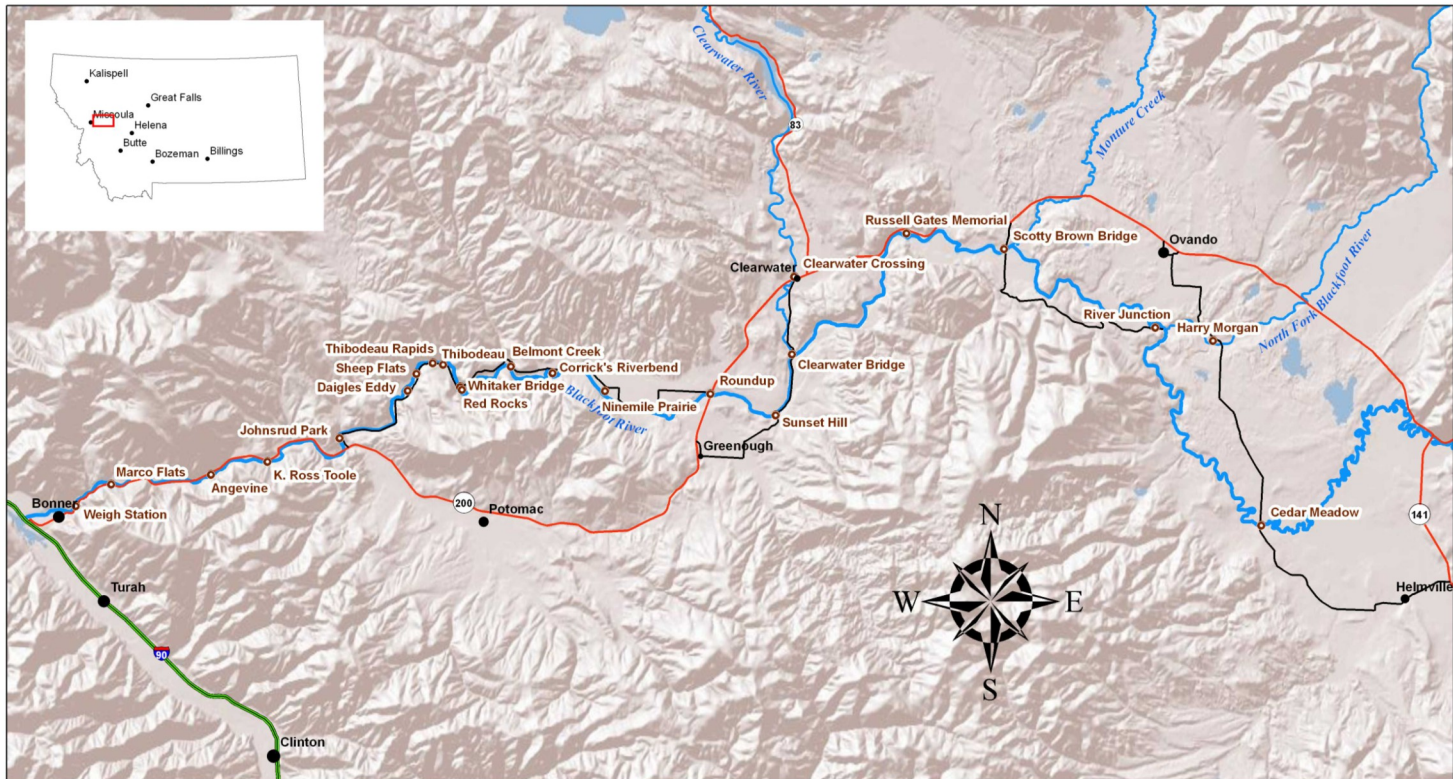
Seasonal Conditions affected use significantly in 2011. With extreme high water, FWP extended the time period that groups of up to 40 people could use reaches 4, 5, and 6 from June 15, 2011 to July 15, 2011. High flows also affected use patterns with an increase in whitewater traffic during the early season, a reduction in tubing, due to cold water extending into July, and shifting angling use to later months where fishing conditions were more favorable.



Helicopter loads water above Marco Flats FAS

There were no seasonal fishing restrictions but a very dry late summer and ongoing fires lead to stage 1 fire restrictions. The *West Riverside Fire* , close to the town of Bonner, led to a closure of the Blackfoot River from Wisherd Bridge through the confluence with the Clark Fork River. This closure was two weeks long and allowed equipment and crews to safely work the fire.

Map 1: The Blackfoot River & Access Sites



Staff

The Blackfoot River recreation management program is based out of the FWP Region 2 Headquarters in Missoula, MT. Staff administers the Special Recreation Permit (SRP) program, day-to-day operations, program implementation, and compilation of reports related to recreation on the Blackfoot River. Managers are assisted by the following FWP staff who have responsibilities specific to managing recreation on the Blackfoot River:

- FAS Coordinator (year-round)
- Recreation Warden (year-round)- *vacant in 2011*
- Blackfoot River Ranger (3/4 year)
- Blackfoot Survey Technician (May-Aug.)
- Upper Blackfoot Caretaker (May-Aug.)
- Lower Blackfoot Caretaker (May-Aug.)

In addition to staff dedicated specifically to the Blackfoot, there are other FWP personnel such as a Regional River Ranger, Regional FAS Maintenance Crew, Program Managers, Wardens and Biologists who also contribute to management of the Blackfoot.

Blackfoot River Reaches

For the purpose of managing recreation, the Blackfoot River is broken into seven reaches. These reaches are defined geographic sections of the river based on the physical settings and types of recreational experiences associated with each reach. Additionally, maximum group size limits have been established specifically for each reach. Table 1 (page 3) lists the seven reaches and a description of their locations.

Table 1: Blackfoot River Reaches

Reach	Reach Description
1	Headwaters to Mineral Hill
2	Mineral Hill to North Fork Confluence
3	Harry Morgan FAS (on the North Fork) to Russell Gates FAS
4	Russell Gates FAS to Roundup FAS
Upper 5	Roundup FAS to Whitaker Bridge
Lower 5	Whitaker Bridge to Johnsrud Park FAS
6	Johnsrud Park FAS to Bonner
7	North Fork of Blackfoot River above Harry Morgan FAS

Visitor Use Statistics

There are currently four methods utilized to gather visitor use statistics for the Blackfoot River: (1) statewide FWP angling surveys, (2) electronic traffic counters placed at selected access sites and locations throughout the Blackfoot, (3) a summer use monitoring survey that takes place each summer from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and (4) floater self-registration kiosks, which were installed in 2010 at sites in the upper Blackfoot. Each of these methods and the results are described in the following subsections.

Angling Survey

FWP conducts statewide angling surveys every other year for a single given license year (the beginning of March through the end of February). These surveys provide pressure estimates (in angling days) for specific water bodies in Montana, along with angler satisfaction and angler crowding ratings. The most recent estimates available for this report are those from 2009.

Table 2 compares angling pressure estimates from 2003 through 2009 for four sections of the Blackfoot and North Fork of the Blackfoot Rivers. These sections do not directly correspond with the river reaches for managing recreation that were described earlier. Instead, they were developed for fisheries management purposes.

Table 3 compares angler satisfaction and crowding ratings for the Blackfoot River during 2009. Also listed are the average number of people seen during each trip, year-round and during the summer months for both resident and non-resident anglers.

During 2009, the most recent summary year, 83% of the angling days on the Blackfoot River occurred during the summer months (May through September). Non-resident anglers made up 33% of the total angling use in the summer months. Angler satisfaction indicated non-residents were slightly more satisfied than residents and residents perceived the river to be slightly more crowded than non-residents. The number of people observed during each trip for 2009 was higher for residents and about the same for non-residents when compared to 2007.

Table 2: Blackfoot and North Fork Angling Pressure (2003-2009)

River Section	Angling Days/Year			
	2003	2005	2007	2009
Headwaters to Arrasta Creek	4142	7220	3182	9044
Arrasta Creek to the North Fork	5072	2900	4286	7918
North Fork to the Clearwater	11355	8549	12685	16999
Clearwater to the Clark Fork	18456	18268	13580	23321
Blackfoot Total	39025	36937	33733	57282
North Fork of the Blackfoot River	833	2602	953	2047

Table 3: Blackfoot River Angler Satisfaction and Crowding Ratings (2005, 2007 and 2009)

	Resident			Non-resident		
	2005	2007	2009	2005	2007	2009
Year-round Angler Satisfaction Rating 1 (poor) - 5 (excellent)	2.84	2.97	2.78	2.92	2.85	3.30
Summer Angler Satisfaction Rating 1 (poor) - 5 (excellent)	2.85	2.97	2.81	2.89	2.82	3.29
Year-round Angler Crowding Rating 1 (sparse) - 5 (crowded)	2.08	2.10	2.07	1.73	1.67	1.78
Summer Angler Crowding Rating 1 (sparse) - 5 (crowded)	2.16	2.20	2.16	1.78	1.71	1.82
Average # of Other People Seen During Each Trip (Year-round)	12	8	12	9	10	10
Average # of Other People Seen During Each Trip (Summer)	13	7	14	10	10	11

Electronic Traffic Counts

Traffic counts are collected at certain sites along the Blackfoot River through the use of electronic counters. These counters record the number of vehicles using sites and data is collected by FWP staff and compiled on a monthly basis. This data can be used to compare the amount of traffic using a site over the course of a season and to compare use trends from one year to the next.

Figure 2 (page 4) compares the cumulative traffic counts of four Blackfoot River fishing access sites with counters during the course of the 2011 season. Johnsrud Park FAS

received double the amount of vehicles, compared to the other sites, which would be expected since it's one of the busiest FASs on the Blackfoot River. Scotty Brown Bridge received the least amount of vehicle traffic, which can be attributed, in part, to the parking limitations (four spaces) of the site.

Figure 2: Cumulative Traffic Counts for the Blackfoot River Fishing Access Sites (May through September) 2011

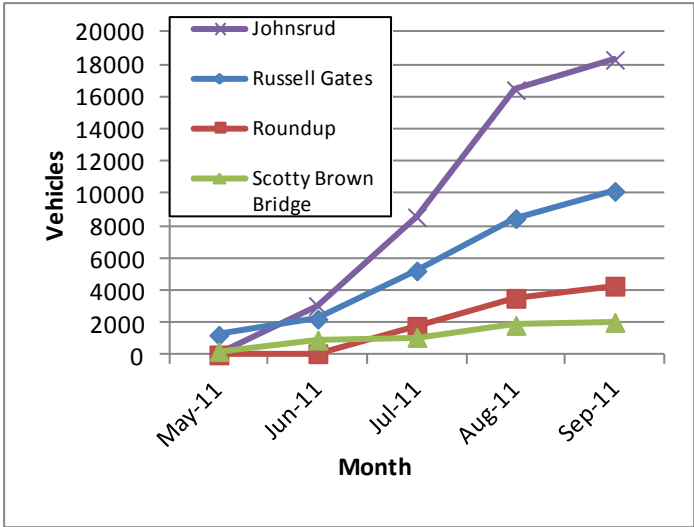
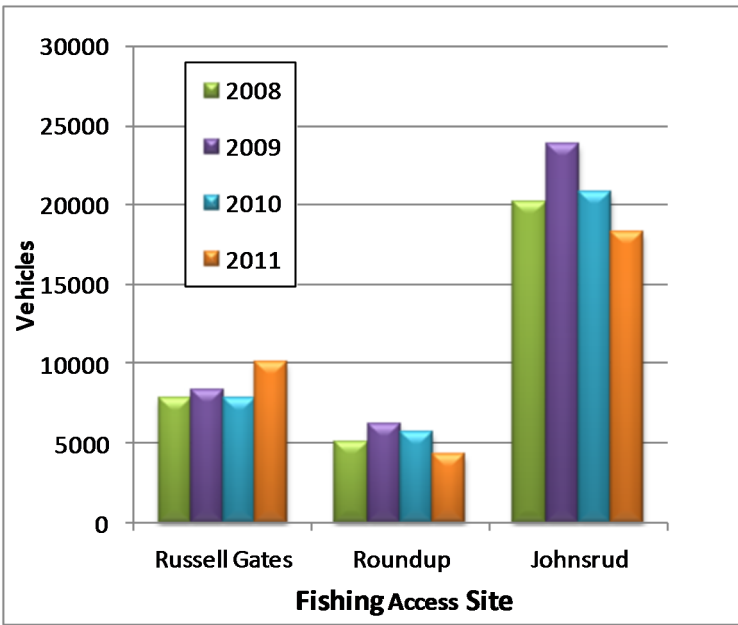


Figure 3 shows a comparison of three Blackfoot River access sites that have been monitored for summer traffic counts over the past five years. Vehicle numbers at these sites have remained fairly steady. Roundup and Russell Gates have seen increases over the past few years. A contributing factor to the reduction of use at Russell Gates FAS in 2011 were the closures due to flooding.

Figure 3: Comparison of Summer Traffic Counts at Three Blackfoot River Fishing Access Sites (2008-2011)

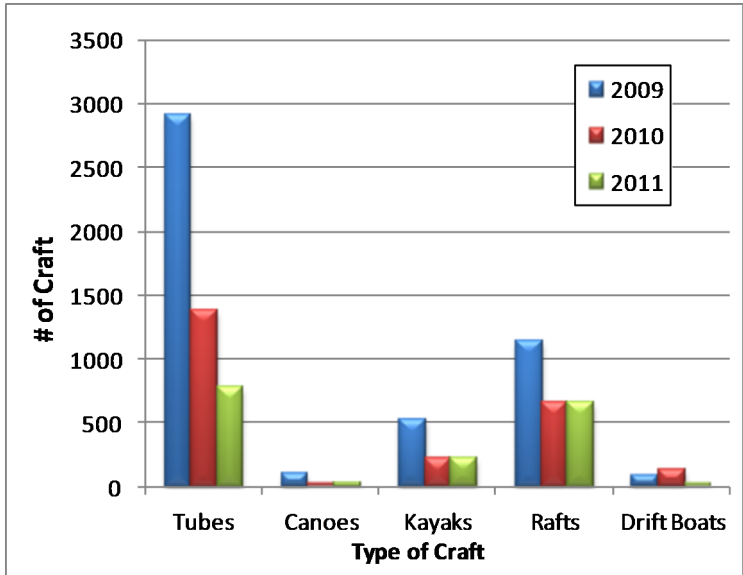


As a whole, use was down slightly at all FASs. The seasonal conditions, cooler weather and very high water may have influenced the use at these sites with less people using the river to escape the high temperatures seen in prior years and some recreationists being deterred by safety concerns associated with high water flows.

Summer Use Monitoring

From Memorial Day through Labor Day, a use monitoring survey is conducted to help FWP and the BLM understand the type of use occurring on the Blackfoot River and at the access sites. The survey compares the amount of use occurring at eight access sites throughout the Blackfoot. These sites were selected by managers to capture information that is reflective of the seven reaches of the Blackfoot during the summer season. In an effort to capture representative data, sites are randomly selected for sampling during different times of the day, on weekends and on weekdays. The eight fishing access sites selected for the use monitoring survey are Harry Morgan, Russell Gates, Roundup, Corrick's River Bend, Whitaker Bridge, Johnsrud, Angevine, and Weigh Station.

Figure 4: Observed type of craft used at surveyed sites during the summer months (2009-2011)

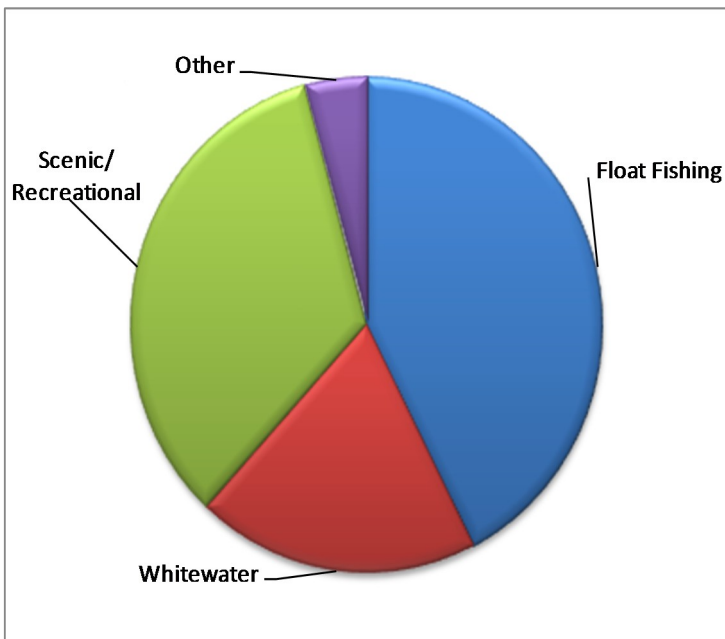


In Figure 4, the type of craft observed at surveyed sites during 2009, 2010 and 2011 summer months is shown. Tubes are far more popular than other types of craft during the summer season, but their use has decreased considerably. The reduction in use of tubes may be attributed to high, cold water, fewer extremely hot summer days and an increase in tube and float recreation closer to Missoula on the Clark Fork River. With the high flows during 2011, Rafts, Kayaks and Canoes were all observed in higher numbers than in 2010 as whitewater activities increased.

Floater Self-Registration

Floater self-registration kiosks were introduced to the upper reaches of the Blackfoot in 2010. Information collected from the self-registration program includes, location of launch and take out, time and date, type of activity engaged in on the river, how long a person was on the water, how many other boats they observed and their satisfaction with the number of other boats they encountered on the river.

Figure 5: Reported type of use via self-registration (2011)

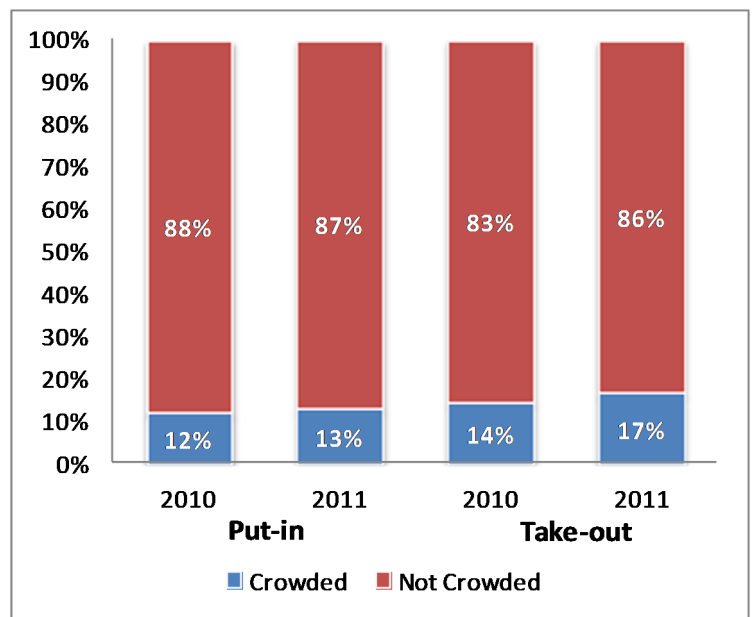


In 2011, 826 self-registration coupons (deposited at put-ins) were completed, which was slightly more than the 762 completed in 2010. Stub return, which are separated from coupons and deposited at take-out locations, were down slightly from 372 in 2010 to 352 in 2011.

The two part coupon allowed the stub to be returned at the take-out with information pertaining the type and quality of the float. The majority of use was float fishing, with scenic and recreational floating second (Figure 5). The average number of people in a group was just under 5, with 2 boats per group spending 4 hours per float, an average down from 5 1/2 hours in 2010.

Round-Up FAS was the most popular put-in, likely due to its popularity for whitewater use, of which there was more of in 2011. The 3 highest use put-ins were: (1) Round-Up, (2) Harry Morgan, and (3) Russell Gates with the highest use take-outs being: (1) Russell Gates, (2) Johnsrud, and (3) Corrick's River Bend. Figure 6 shows a comparison of the perceived crowding at either the put-in or take-out. Most (around 80%), found neither the put-in or take-out to be crowded.

Figure 6: Access site crowding reported via self-registration



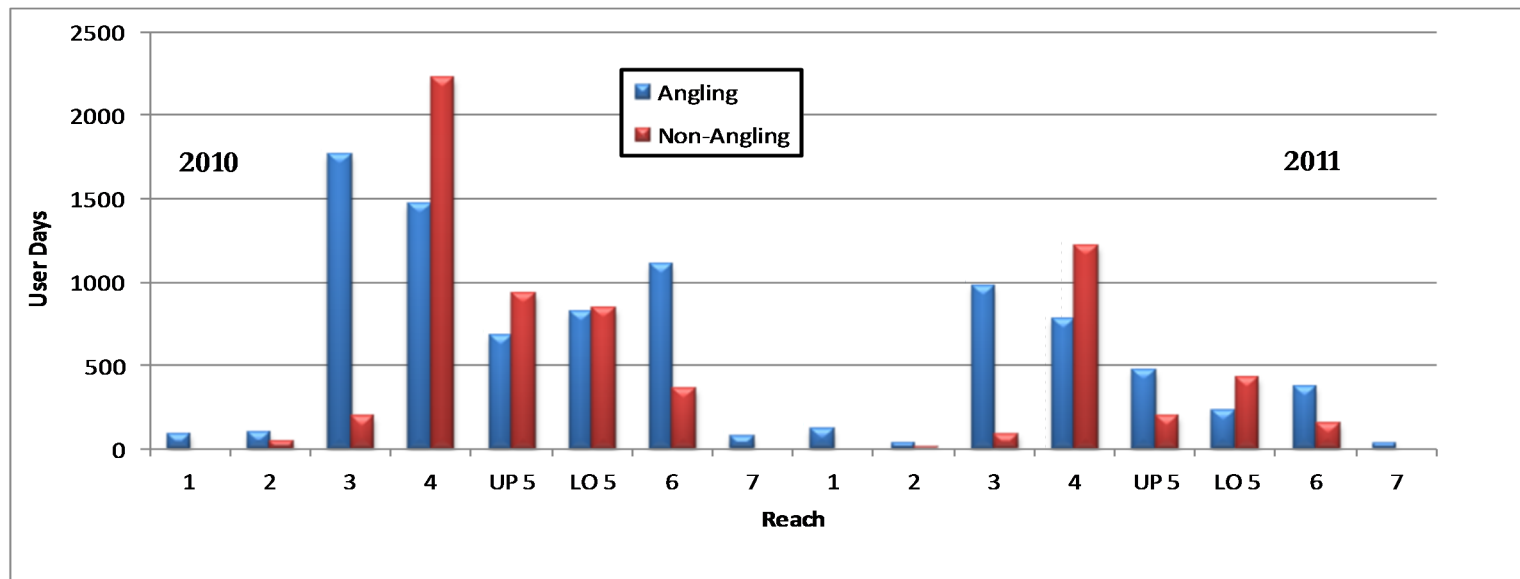
Most (88%), of the written comments provided on the stubs were positive such as “Good day on the river” or “Great time!” This marked a considerable increase in positive comments when compared to 55% in 2010. Concerns voiced in the written comments were organized by theme and included categories such as parking, commercial use, water quality concerns, and requests for additional self registration stations.

The number of floaters who filled out self-registration cards followed a trend similar to that of vehicles recorded by car counter, moving through the same sites. This relationship suggested compliance that was consistent with access site visitation.

Through the 2011 season, volunteers and FWP staff monitored kiosks and surveyed self-registration compliance. Of those observed, 23% filled out registration cards without being contacted. Of those who did not fill out a registration card, half said they were unaware of the self-registration process. Once contacted, 81% of those who had been unaware of the self-registration process chose to complete a self-registration card.

In 2012, FWP will continue to monitor self-registration kiosks and enhance public awareness of the self-registration process as well as the value of data and feedback gathered through self-registration. The data collected via the self-registration program is an important component of FWP's management efforts to provide continued high quality recreational opportunities on the Blackfoot.

Figure 7: 2010 and 2011 Commercial User Days by Use Type and River Reach.



Special Recreation Permit (SRP) Program

FWP and the BLM have a cooperative Special Recreation Permit (SRP) program for managing commercial use, organized groups and competitive events on the Blackfoot River and adjacent agency owned or managed lands. Use reports are required for each authorized permittee and that data is compiled at the end of the year. In 2011 there were 75 active commercial permittees and 1 competitive event authorized under the Blackfoot SRP program. A description of the use authorized by the SRP program is described under the following categories: (1) commercial use, (2) competitive events and (3) Organized Groups.

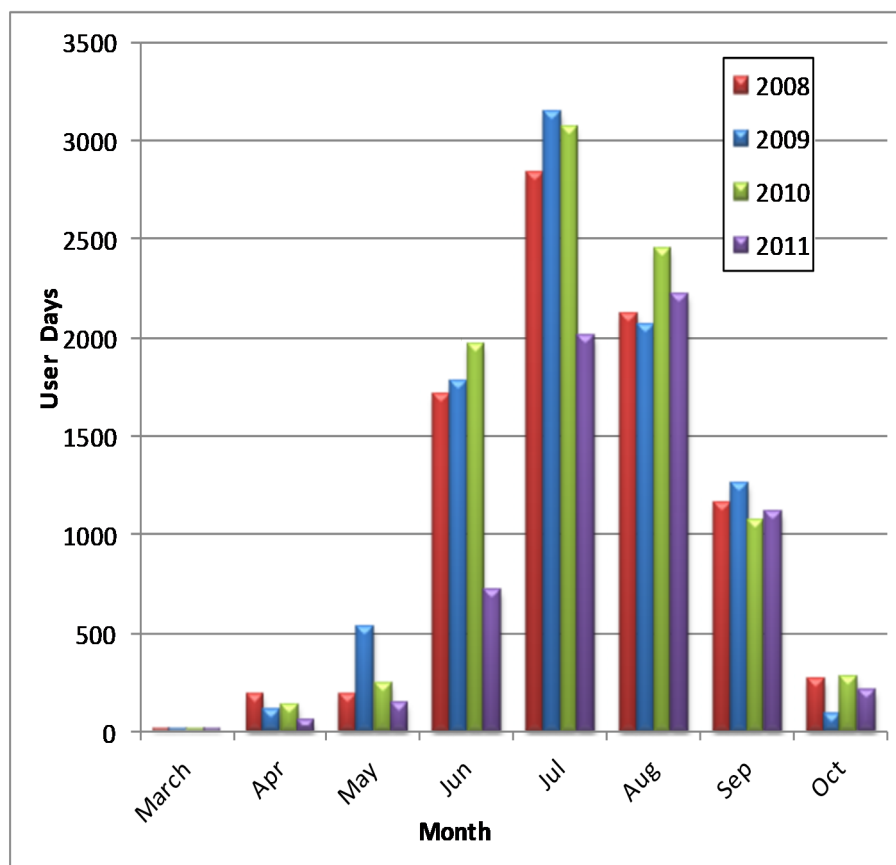
Commercial Use

The primary types of commercial use occurring on the Blackfoot River are guided float angling and whitewater trips. Figure 7 illustrates the number of angling and non-angling user days conducted on the Blackfoot River for each reach during 2010 and 2011.

During 2010 and 2011, Reach Three received the most pressure from commercial angling, while Reach Four had the largest amount of commercial non-angling user days. The majority of commercial angling use occurred in Reaches Three, Four, and Five. Non-angling commercial use, such as whitewater trips, scenic floats and swiftwater rescue training primarily took place in Reaches Four and Five. Overall, use in 2011 was down, a direct result of water levels and shifting recreational use patterns.

Figure 8 (page 6) shows the number of commercial user days from month to month during the past four seasons. The primary season of commercial use is Memorial Day through Labor Day. In 2011 70% of the total commercial use days occurred during that time period. Commercial use declined in 2011 with very high water delaying some of the commercial use season into August and September.

Figure 8: Commercial User Days by Month



Competitive Events

One competitive event took place on the Blackfoot River and consisted of a canoe and kayak slalom competition and downriver race. The slalom course was set up at the Roundup rapid, just upstream from the FAS, and the downriver race began at Johnsrud Park and ended at Weigh Station. 45 participants attended the three-day event.

Organized Groups

No Organized Group Special Recreation Permits were issued in 2011.

Table 4: Fee Revenue Summary (2009, 2010 and 2011)

Source of Fee Revenue	2009	2010	2011
Harry Morgan Campground	\$1,126.25	\$1,041.15	\$792.00
River Junction Campground	\$1,834.50	\$1,894.52	\$467.78
Russell Gates Campground	\$5,329.96	\$5,728.06	\$4,034.75
Ninemile Prairie Campground	\$1,163.00	\$876.00	\$781.50
Corrick's River Bend Campground	\$5,533.56	\$6,020.65	\$3,148.90
Thibodeau Campground	\$3,523.42	\$3,401.75	\$2,344.50
Johnsrud Shelter Rental	\$75.00	\$225.00	\$75.00
Commercial Use SRP	\$26,879.06	\$29,848.50	\$28,436.62
Organized Group SRP	\$399.00	\$287.00	\$0.00
Competitive Event SRP	\$238.00	\$327.00	\$135.00
Totals	\$46,101.75	\$49,649.63	\$40,216.05

Fee Revenue

Table 4 shows the breakdown of fees collected for certain types of recreational activities on the Blackfoot River and at access sites. Fees are collected at campgrounds, for picnic shelter reservations, and for commercial use and competitive events permitted under the Blackfoot River SRP program.

The total amount of fee revenue generated for 2011 was \$40,216.05. All campgrounds in 2011 generated less revenue than in 2010 or 2009. Weather and flooding directly contributed to reduced use.

Enforcement

Coordinated law enforcement is an important tool in managing recreation on the Blackfoot River. In 2004, a Blackfoot Corridor enforcement operational guideline was established to coordinate the efforts of FWP, the BLM, Missoula County Sheriff's Office, the Montana Highway Patrol, Potomac-Greenough Fire and Quick Response Unit and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. The main focus of this coordination is to provide a safe environment for Blackfoot recreationists.

Pre-season meetings, great cooperation as well as communication, and years of experience with this cooperation have led to productive efforts to reduce public safety concerns and increase the quality of recreational opportunities in the lower reaches of the Blackfoot River, particularly in the area between Whitaker Bridge and Johnsrud Park FAS. Enforcement efforts have taken a no-tolerance approach to violations such as disorderly conduct, public urination, nudity, underage possession of alcohol, illegal drug use, and glass containers.

Table 5: Blackfoot River Clean-up Statistics

Year	Trash Collected						Participants
	Aluminum Cans	Glass Bottles	Plastic Bottles	Shoes	Hats	Inner-Tubes	
2004	1951	300	N/A	36	N/A	N/A	74
2005	2741	173	185	63	19	12	101
2006	3994	250	297	84	N/A	16	118
2007	3365	194	459	88	8	18	257
2008	1131	54	171	58	8	0	173
2009	1551	72	178	89	11	14	139
2010	1027	89	166	41	7	10	116
2011	221	34	24	15	8	3	108

The coordinated efforts of multiple agencies continue to be effective. This achievement has helped promote an increasingly family friendly atmosphere, which is evidenced by families reappearing at the banks of the Blackfoot River over the past few seasons.

In addition, Blackfoot and other FWP Rangers conducted six patrol floats from Cedar Meadows FAS to Johnsrud FAS covering 51 miles of river. An illegal camp was ticketed and 9 other illegal fire rings were dismantled and removed. Land owners reported 2 illegal camps after campers had left. Float patrols will provide Rangers and Wardens better access to these illegal camps. In addition to law enforcement, float patrols provided better contacts with floaters and anglers, helped to reduce user conflicts, provided use and resource data, and allowed rangers access to areas only accessible by water. Float patrols will continue in 2012 in an effort to encourage appropriate recreational use of the Blackfoot River.

Blackfoot River Clean-up

The eighth annual Blackfoot River Clean-up took place on July 30. The event is held annually on the last Saturday in July and is sponsored by the Blackfoot Home and Community Club, FWP and the BLM.

Table 5 compares the amount of litter collected for each clean-up year and the number of participants involved. Collection amounts were reduced in 2011 due to very high flows and reduced river use in June. Despite high water the clean-up still garnered 108 willing volunteers.

In addition to typical refuse, a 1910 National Iron log loader wheel was removed from the river bottom where it could have been a hazard to river users. The several hundred pound wheel is now on display at the interpretative site located at Sheep Flats. The 2012 Blackfoot River Clean-Up is scheduled for Saturday July 28th, 2012.



1910 National Iron Log Loader Wheel

Accomplishments

- The Milltown Dam removal project is now in full scale river restoration and State Park development. The area will continue to remain closed to the public until June 2013 while construction and restoration efforts are underway.

- Russell Gates Memorial FAS had a major bank stabilization project completed to prevent further erosion (see photos).
- FWP, with assistance from the Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper, compiled observations from self-registration kiosks to better understand recreation use data.
- River rangers implemented an on-water patrol program for monitoring recreational use and improving contacts with recreationists.
- Initial tours of select FASs in the Blackfoot were taken with DNRC foresters to assess mountain pine beetle impacts. Potential future pilot projects aimed at minimizing beetle impacts will be evaluated for 2012.



River bank at Russell Gates FAS (before)



River bank at Russell Gates FAS (after)

Contact Information

For further information about the content of this annual report or for questions/comments regarding recreation or recreation management, please contact:

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